

[Elam Franklin Dempsey]

1

[Oct. 39?] Jaques Jacques Upshaw

Page 1.

ELAM FRANKLIN DEMPSEY

"I was born — this Elam Franklin Dempsey — as Benjamin Franklin, that great old sage of America. As for the Dempsey part, I always say that it is the same as Jack Dempsey, spelled the same way, so there is no further difficulty there. Elam Franklin Dempsey. I was born July 6, 1878, in Atlanta, Georgia, Tattnell Street, the Peachtree of that day, in my grandfather's house. My grandfather's name was John Durant Smith. My parents lived in Dodge County, and for a season my father lived in a place bearing his own name, Dempsey, Georgia. He was engaged in the crosstie trade, manufacturing and selling them, and therefore he traveled a good bit, living between Georgia and Florida. We lived here and there between north Florida and Georgia. His health breaking down around 1880, he was forced to give up his occupation, and had to move to Jackson, Georgia, near Indian Springs, the water of which is a specific, as you may know, for malarial diseases. He lived there thirty-seven years, raising four children.

"My oldest sister was named Irene, the second, Ernestine, who is now teaching English at Girls' High School, here in Atlanta. My brother, Thomas Jackson Dempsey, Junior, is in the education department of Georgia, a well-known supervisor-inspector of schools under Dr. Collins. He is next to Dr. Collins in rank. I'd be glad if you'd interview him sometime. He's a man who, though well-known in some circles, is not as much recognized as his ability and accomplishments warrant. Of course, he's younger than I am, and hasn't had as much

Library of Congress

time to make himself known. He lives at Watkins, Georgia, but works and has his office in the State Capitol.

"I just happened to think of it, if you will look at the Memoirs of Georgia you will see a sketch of my father.

"Both my parents were natives of Cobb County. My father was Thomas Jackson Dempsey, son of Reverend A. G. Dempsey — Reverend Alvin Green Dempsey. I've 2 often wondered how the Alvin and the Green came into the Dempsey family, but I haven't done the necessary research yet to find out. My mother was Narcissa America Smith — N a r c i s s a. It's a peculiar old-fashioned name, and my mother never liked it. But we all loved its old-fashioned sound.

"Now, going back. We were at Butts County, where we lived many years. My father had a large mercantile business there, and other businesses, and was also a lawyer. Later he went to Florida, and at the age of seventy-five was elected Judge of the Supreme Court there, and won flattering praise for his excellent handling of the somewhat involved Florida law. He was never reversed on a single judgment, and only one was ever questioned, and everybody said that he was right on that.

"My father was a very aggressive man. I'm not very much like him in that — unless you put me under pressure. My grandmother used to say of him, 'He's like Job's war horse. He sniffs a battle from afar, and rushes into battle.'

"At Jackson I had the usual experience of going through grammar school and then through high school. I had fine teachers, and I do appreciate good teachers and good preachers! My pastors were very lovely to me, also. One of them I would like to mention in particular. Reverend John L. Bowden. I remember him reverently. I remember him, giving me counsel many times. Once he said, 'My boy, a man ought not to preach to study in the pulpit, but should preach from the standpoint of study.' By that he meant that one shouldn't use the pulpit for experimenting, but should study diligently before preaching. I loved and honored

Library of Congress

him, and when he died I had the honor to write the memoirs of his life. I'd love to name all the pastors, but of course, that would take too long.

“Well, to get back to school. We didn't have, in those days, a formal kindergarten. But we were fortunate in having a lady — Miss Eva Sassnitt, daughter of William Sassnitt, with us. She was an intellectual and devout woman, and had that enthusiasm of a teacher (which is the most valuable attribute of a teacher). She was my first teacher, and was more or less in charge of schools there. Then a schoolhouse was built at Jackson, where I first went to school. We were fortunate in being one of the earlier of the counties to have a good school.

“Professor [Blasingame?] I remember, Professor J. C. Blasingame, and Professor Troy Kelley, constituted the faculty that early gave shape to the school. . . . A typical day in school: First, in the large auditorium, in the morning we had chapel for Bible-reading and exercises. There would be comment, sometimes by the visitors, if any were present, on the Bible reading of the day, then there would be singing from a well-chosen hymn book. Professor Blasingame, who was always enthusiastic about music, would lead the singing.

“It was the privilege of Jackson High School to have a series of talks each year by visitors — well-known men, whose talks would inspire us and counsel us to make something of ourselves. For instance, Doctor Quigg, a Scotch divine, lectured on his experiences on in Cuba, and his lecture was one of the most impressive of the series. Another man I remember was Marcus W. Beck, a native of Jackson. He gave many talks, and sedulously prepared for these addresses. He came to us with inspiring remarks, and filled us with aspiration for great things. It was natural that a man of such wonderful gifts and ability should advance rapidly, and I was not surprised when he became a Justice of the Superior Court.

I remember one day seeing him walking under the large oak trees along the walk on the sunlit sand. It was one of these beautiful Georgia mornings that we have, and the sunlight

Library of Congress

was coming down through the leaves of the trees, making a pattern of checkered light and shade — a beautiful sight. He was absorbed in his meditations, and wasn't aware that anyone was watching.

4

I saw him, though, gesturing vigorously, and walking soberly along. It was inspiring to me. I know that he was preparing another one of his fine talks. I said to myself, 'Here is a man who expects to be somebody. He is willing to pay the price, and works hard.' I'll never forget the picture of him striding down the walk of white sand, overshadowed by tremendous oak trees, through which the sunlight filtered down.

"We had some remarkable people in Jackson. Old Dr. Anderson, for instance. Nobody knew anything about him, or where he came from. He just appeared out of nowhere, before the railroad came, even. He was a man who had had considerable tragedy in his life, and he took refuge in his books. He was a very eccentric man, a very smart man. He was the one my father studied law under. The people of the famous Will N. Harbin were also there in Jackson.

. "But you want a typical day in school, and I got off on this side track After [shapel?] we went to recitations again, then we had mid-morning recess, playing games, and so forth. Let's see if I remember any of those games. Of course, there was the craze over marbles that was current then, and top-spinning — knulling tops, it was called — and races. We waxed quite ambitious in our athletic program. Some of the boys got two ropes and tied them to high limbs, and they would swing way out with them. Sometimes they would put a little fellow on it and swing him way around, until finally he had to let go and do a belly-buster. I always hated to see them do that. Sometimes the little boys would get on the swings themselves, and fall off. They shouldn't have done it. But a young boy is ambitious, you know, and they didn't think about the consequences.

Library of Congress

I used to get after the big boys for picking on the little ones, and one time I had a fight about it. One of the big boys was teasing and bullying a little boy. He wasn't really mean, but just the bullying kind. I said to 5 him that I'd give him a licking if he did anything to the little fellow again, and of course, that was the invitation he was waiting for. The bully got behind me and put his hands on my shoulders and said, 'Elam will take care of him; yes old Elam'll take care of him.' When he jumped on the boy again I hit him. I had a negro friend who had told me something about fighting, and he had said to kick his shins. I didn't realize as fully as I should have that he could kick my shins, too. It was a game two could play, and his shoes were heavier than mine. For days after that my shins were sore. I made up my mind that the shoe business wouldn't work, and I took care to use another method next time. I wasn't really a belligerent boy, but I didn't like to see anybody picked on. All this fighting took place at the morning recess.

"At noon most of us went home for dinner, for most of us lived there in town. We came back and had recitations again, and the afternoons did seem long! We stayed till four o'clock, usually. Then there would be those, sometimes, who were kept in. That was bad on the teachers and the pupils, too. There was recognition of fidelity in marks, sometimes based on a hundred, sometimes on ten.

We had a debating society, which would rise, flourish, and fail. Then we'd have declamation time, being very ambitious and anxious to be Daniel Websters and Thomas Paines. We would get together in groups in the fields, far enough from one another so that we wouldn't disturb each other, and practice. We didn't know anything about platform posture, gesturing, and so forth, though, and it was mainly main strength and awkwardness. We could holler loud, though, and we did. When anybody had advanced to the point where he could be heard clear across the village he was thought to be very good.

Sometimes in vacation time we put on exercises, and had debates. And it did us good, too. That old time custom contributed to civic thinking, and taught 6 us to think on our feet

Library of Congress

and get up before the public / and put our thoughts into words. I've noticed that those who excelled at those things have done well in life since then.

“There was a lady who taught music at the school — mandolin, guitar, and violin. We had a very musical group in Jackson, Georgia. Professor Blasingame took a large part in the musical activities.

“The young men and women who went away from Jackson represented us well. Major Woodward, of G. M. A.; Professor Henry F. Fletcher; Douglas Watson, of Gordon Institute; and O. L.[,?] Thaxton, of G. S. C. W., are some of the men who have gone out into the world from Jackson and made good.

“In September, after my sixteenth birthday, I entered Junior College and went two years. My schooling was interrupted by ill health, and I stopped out and stayed one year on the farm. I have always been glad that I did, for it improved my health and helped me to be strong. In June, 1899, I graduated, having had the pleasure of being three years under Bishop Candler. I graduated, though, under Dr. C. E. Dowman. At college, in spite of ill health, I was champion debater, and was editor of the Phoenix. I entered every debate they had. At that time Mrs. Corra White Harris was my Sunday School teacher. You knew Mrs. Harris, the famous Georgia author. She was at that time wife of the Greek professor at Emory, Professor L. H. Harris, and as always, her mind scintillated with wit and shrewd understanding. I spent many an evening with her and others, enjoying their conversation and learning. I never enjoyed anything more than those informal gatherings where we discussed all the things I had been interested in for so long. I simply ate it up.

“During my college life I tried to take part in all the various activities — the religious, social, athletic, and all of them. I was especially interested in debating.

Library of Congress

"I thought that a person in college should get a well-rounded education and culture, and I set out to do this. I didn't lay particular stress on the social activities, though I was a member of the A.T.O. Fraternity.

"The incentive I had at Emory was not personal ambition, but to please my father and mother. I was so sickly that the work was very taxing on me, but I knew that for me to do well would give them joy, and that was the happiest part of it for me.

"There at college all the books I had longed to have the opportunity to read were at hand, and I read them incessantly. I read everything — Balzac, even. Ought not to have read some I did, perhaps, but I didn't know, and I gloried in the opportunity of having so many books at hand. In this atmosphere of books and learning at Emory I was in paradise. I was a very ardent fiction reader, but I had read that one must not be desultory in his reading, and I decided to limit myself to only one book of fiction at a time, and finally cut them out altogether.

"I can tell you, though, I stuck my tooth into one thing that was hard to handle. Mrs. Harris had recommended to me the *Journal of Amiel*, *Journal Intime*, translated by Mrs. Humphrey Ward. It is a book of philosophical thoughts that Amiel jotted down — deep meditations on many subjects Talk about Attic Salt, talk about Ambrosial Nights, we had them in Oxford, Georgia, there at little Emory!

"My college friendships have been very precious to me. My roommate was G. M. [Eakes?]. He was like a brother to me. We were inseperables, and deskmates back in Jackson before going to college. He was my good guide and counselor and helped me on many an occasion. He loved me truly, and I him. He meant much to me.

8

"When I was in the Freshman class in college an incident occurred which was rather amusing, which involved Eakes. He was persuaded by the rest of the boys to co-operate

Library of Congress

with them in scaring me. We didn't have any regular hazing then, but usually a new boy would be initiated in some manner by the older students. Well, they had decided to play the "dumbull" on me, which in tying a string on a nail stuck under the clapboard of a house and then rosining it and stroking it. It produces a weird sound, sometimes high and screeching, and sometimes low and ominous. Well, Eakes, being my roommate, was appointed to talk to me that night and get me properly in the mood to be scared. He began telling me all kinds of weird things about the effect of such a sound. I wasn't much impressed, however, and said that it was just silly. Well, we went to bed, and presently the noise began. We awoke, and Eakes asked me if I heard it. 'Yes,' I said, 'it sounds rather silly, doesn't it?' Then I turned over and went back to sleep and didn't wake up anymore that night. But Eakes told me later that he was kept awake half the night by the dumbull that was supposed to frighten me. He told the other boys about it the next morning, and one of them said, 'Well, I told them all the time that you couldn't do anything with that ugly old gangling, old long-legged devil!' I was long and awkward and thin then.

"Later in life, when I was started on my way upward he befriended me time and again, and took me about with him to various churches and let me help him in evangelical [work?]. I surely went through agonies to get up sermons and arguments for those services. I was just out of college, and it is not easy to get on to making a good sermon. A preacher has got to not only lay down a proposition, but he must argue it, apply it, persuade and admonish, and close with a definite and earnest proposition.

9

"I could tell you many episodes of that part of my experiences. After we closed the meetings we would all go off somewhere and have a houseparty and relax before going into the next series of evangelical services. My good friend, Reverend G. M. Eakes, who was my roommate at Oxford, entertained a number of pastors once, and during my stay there I had a great deal of pleasure in going through his large library. I remember one volume particularly, a volume of James Whitcomb Riley, in which was a poem called THE PIPES o' PAN OF [ZEKESBURY?], and I read and reread it many times, I became so

Library of Congress

infatuated with it. I didn't try to memorize it, but I found the other day that I remembered it word for word. I amazed myself by quoting it line for line, all the nine stanzas:

(Quotes poem)

"Well, I've been blessed with a good memory, but I was much surprised at myself. The memory, I think has been depreciated lately too much — probably because in former years it was rated too high. Not enough attention is given to cultivating it. The memory is handmaiden to all our faculties. What could you do if you lost your memory? Why, if you couldn't remember, you would lose even your personal identity. When I was a young boy I used to memorize just for the pleasure of it all the examples of correct English given in Hart's Readers. My mother, seeing me interested in cultivating my memory, suggested that I learn some hymns. I took her suggestion, and have always been grateful for it, for I still remember them. And I have been able to remember many Bible verses because of a good memory.

"And speaking of the Bible, do you know that there is not a book in the Bible that is not built on some other book? That shows that there was one supervisory intelligence for the whole work. Most people think that the Pentateuch is difficult to account for on the score of literary sources. But this need not perplex if one will notice such passage as the second half of Exodus, Seventeen, and such like scriptures. It is evident from these that writing and keeping records was a matter entirely familiar to the Hebrews in charge of the migration of the Jews in the Wilderness.

"I graduated, and then joined the conference in Lagrange, Georgia, following the life of an itinerant minister. Later, I graduated from Vanderbilt, in 1906, and it was my privilege to deliver on that occasion the address representing the department. Bishop Hendricks was on the platform. In November, 1909, it was Bishop Hendricks who presided over conference, and he gave me an appointment to Trinity Church, here in Atlanta. Later, he was helpful to me in writing the life of Bishop Haygood.

Library of Congress

“When I entered the ministry I felt very strongly that I had to be mentally honest, and wanted to go into the Biblical problems deeply. Not all men feel that way, and I pass no judgment or criticism on those. I want to make that plain. But for myself, I knew that I had to study a great deal before I could satisfy myself on the various Biblical questions.

“I wanted to get more education to broaden my knowledge, and I requested Bishop Hendricks to appoint me a student to Vanderbilt University. I always believed, like Dr. Lovick Pierce, father of Bishop Pierce, said, that a call to preach is a call to get ready to preach. After graduating from Vanderbilt I returned to Georgia, and married Georgia Roger Hunnicutt, the daughter of James B. Hunnicutt. We have not been blessed with children, but my wife still lives, and blesses my life.

“My first charge in the preaching line was in the city mission in Atlanta. Then I served circuits and stations in North Georgia Conference and was appointed to Trinity Church in 1910. I was Dean of the Theology Department at Emory from 11 1914 to 1918; paster at Athens, First Methodist Church; Rome, First Church; and was Secretary-treasurer of the Christian Education Movement to [1926?], and was presiding elder of the Oxford district from 1926 to 1930. From 1932 [to?] 1934 I was pastor at Madison, and from 1934 to 1936 at the First Methodist Church in Toccoa, Georgia.

“At present I have been given a sabbatical year to complete and [publish?] the life of Bishop Haygood, which his family requested me to write some time age.

“My comment on my record of varied service is that no one is more surprised at its character than I. My expectations when I left college — and I fully expected that and nothing more — was to be pastor of a church. It came as a great surprise — and almost alarm to me/ [?] when I saw I was being called in phases of service somewhat different from that detached work. But it was the call of Providence and the voice of the Church, and it would have been presumptuous of me to refuse. I have tried as best I could to serve in these various fields.

Library of Congress

"Among other things I have been trustee of various institutions — Holmes Institute, Emory College, Emory University. I was trustee at Emory for ten years. I have also served in that capacity for Reinhardt College, Lagrange College for Women. Others have invited me to serve, but those are the ones I served.

"I was secretary of the Christian Education Movement during many periods, and one year I raised \$100,000. I'll tell you how that happened. I was within fifteen hundred dollars of that goal when conference met. I looked about and found that Mr. Samuel Candler Dobbs was in the city. Knowing his love for this cause, I called to see him and stated the case to him. In a very kind manner he said, 'Is that all you need?' I replied, 'Yes, sir, that will bring me to my desired goal.' Without further ado he wrote me a check for fifteen hundred 12 dollars. You can imagine with what eagerness I returned to conference, and after getting the Bishop's recognition, stated that here in my hand — holding it aloft - was the last fifteen-hundred dollars on a total of one hundred thousand dollars for the Christian Education Movement. I was very happy, and the whole audience cheered and applauded loudly.

"I taught in the college at Oxford for several years, and enjoyed my life and associations there greatly. It was very pleasant to be with the young men and help them as much as I could to understand some fundamentals of Biblical study. One of the things I think important is the ability to speak and enunciate clearly. I don't know whether my enunciation is clear, but I've been told it was. At Oxford, in one of my Bible courses I referred in a lecture to Aaron's budded rod — you remember the story of his rod bursting into bloom. When examination time came one of the boys used in an answer to a question a reference to Aaron's butted rod! I don't know whether he was being facetious, or whether he [understood?] it that way.

"I never had any trouble keeping discipline in my classes, and I didn't have to scare the boys into behaving, either. I tried to be more subtle. One afternoon, I remember, a boy was sitting with his feet propped up on the seat of the desk in front of him. It was a very hot,

Library of Congress

long summer afternoon, and the students were naturally restless, but of course I couldn't allow that. There was a professor at Emory once who used to show the soles of his feet while he lectured, but I don't approve of that kind of conduct. I wanted to call the boy's attention to his position, but I didn't want to hurt his feelings, so I looked straight ahead, at the wall in the back of the room, so that really I wasn't looking at anyone in particular, and yet it seemed that I might be looking toward any student in the room.

13

"I said, 'I have been reading in a magazine recently an article entitled The Upward Tendency of the Foot.' Quick as a flash the boy took his feet down, and it was all I could do not to burst out laughing, but naturally I couldn't afford to smile even.

"Another way I had of keeping them in hand was, if I saw a young fellow [slack?] up in his work, to ask him to come by the desk when class was adjourned. For instance, one of the boys might have been making poor grades in one of the subjects, when I knew that he could do better.

"At the adjournment of class," I would say, 'I would like for Mr. Brown to stop by my desk. Class is adjourned.' I would wait until all the others were gone, then I would turn to the boy and say to him, 'Mr. Brown, do you think you are doing your duty fully by this subject?' He wouldn't know what to say, usually, but would hem and haw and shift from one foot to the other. 'that's enough, sir,' I would tell him. 'I'm sure it will not be necessary to again call your attention to this matter.'

"I didn't believe in embarrassing pupils, as some teachers do. I contend that a pupil usually wants to do well in his studies and maintain good conduct if he gets the proper appreciation from his teachers.

"One of the tenderest little episodes I remember happened at big Emory while I was teaching there. I think the subject of the class in which this occurred was Church History, or some such study. It was not a major, and many laymen elected the course — maybe

Library of Congress

because they thought it was a “crip” course, I don't know. Well, anyway, one day I was a few minutes late to class, but not more than five at the most. When I got to the classroom, however, the door seemed to be locked. I pushed upon it and found that a chair had been propped against it from the inside, anchored under the doorknob — you know 14 how it's done. Well, I just pushed the door on open as if nothing had happened, and quietly set the chair aside. I made no reference to the incident, but went on with the class as usual. Years after that I received a letter from a man in Texas, well-established in business, and he said [that?] he was the one who had propped the chair against the door. It was purely in a spirit of fun, he said, but it had been on his conscience ever since, and he was much struck with the smooth and [gential?] way in which I treated the incident. I appreciated that, and thought it was a beautiful episode in my life.

“A minister meets a variety of people and personalities in his work. There was Mr. Dodd, who was a member of the congregation of my first church. His daughter, Nellie Dodd, had died a little while before, while still very young and beautiful, and he donated money to the church to build a chapel to her memory. He was a business magnate of the city, and an influential citizen, and I called on him one day to ask him advice about making the year's church work successful. Mr. Dodd — Mr. Green T. Dodd — was a bluff, hearty man, and he said, ‘Why just go out there and start throwing rocks and killing snakes!’ Of course, he was using snakes as a symbol of sin. Somebody once said, ‘don't dig up more snakes than you can kill,’ and that's pretty good advice, too. Mr. Dodd was a judgmatical man, and he proved a wise man and counselor for me all during my stay at that church.

“In the membership of what has grown to be Oakland City Baptist Church there was a delightful Irish family. Their home was a delightful place for the young minister. They had a picturesque way of saying, ‘Our name is Shannon, and we are as Irish as the Shannon River.’

“There was quite a little romance to the family, as I learned after knowing them a while. When Mr. and Mrs. Shannon were young they lived in Ireland and were childhood

Library of Congress

sweethearts, but their parents opposed their 15 marriage. Mr. Shannon soon came to America, and married a lady over here. The girl married someone else and lived in India several years. It happened that both Mr. Shannon's wife and the girl's husband died at nearly the same time, and they both went back to Ireland for a visit, of course quite without knowing anything of the other. They met again in Ireland and fell in love all over, married, and came back to America. They are a lovely family, and have some fine children. I have spent many pleasant hours with them.

“One of the most amusing little episodes occurred at Jefferson during a testimonial meeting in church. The meeting was well in progress, and several people had gotten up and made statements to the congregation. We had a lady musician who played the organ for us, and this lady had a peculiar habit of sitting up very rigid and straight while she was playing. She would not sway her body or turn her head, but would turn the whole body at once on the organ stool. During a lull in the service she whirled about very suddenly on the stool, looking like a marionette in a puppet show. “Brothers and Sisters,’ she said, ‘I just feel like I’m a settin on the stool of do-nothin’”. It was very funny, the way it all happened, and many people had a job of it to keep from laughing.

“Very beautiful incidents occurred too. One time we were holding revival services in an old empty store which we rented for a song and used for a chapel. Right next door was a boarding house, and staying there were some very elegant people, but they had met sad financial reverses. They had been a prominent family, but now he avoided his friends because he was poor, and they hesitated to look him up for fear of embarrassing him. Finally, at the end of a year, during the time we were holding revival services next door, he received an offer from a liquor company, which sought to capitalize on his name and good social connections. They offered him a handsome salary of 16 two-hundred dollars a month to use his position to sell liquor to people of the upper classes — Justices of the Supreme Court, and such figures as that. He was a conscientious man, and he came next

Library of Congress

door to the chapel and asked my advice. 'Brother Dempsey,' he said, 'I just don't know what to do. My wife and children are on the verge of starvation, and I need a job badly.'

" 'Brother,' I said to him, 'God has called you to be [righteous?], and He will see you through this crisis. The devil has got you at the lowest [ebb?], and offers to buy you for twenty-four hundred dollars. Don't let him do it.'

"I had ten dollars in my pocket and gave it to him, telling him to stick it out, and that things would be better soon if he would [have?] faith. About two years later I was back in the city, and was attending a service where they were taking up a collection for the superannuated preachers. I wanted the worst kind to give something, but I was very low financially that night, and didn't even have a dollar in my pocket. Presently someone touched me on the sleeve and said that a gentleman wanted to see me outside. I left the service and went out. There I saw a well-dressed man, well-poised, and with the very aspect of financial independence and self respect.

"Brother Dempsey," he greeted me, and I recognized him as the man of two years before, "I want to give you back the ten dollars you let me have when I needed it so badly. Due to your advice I did not take the liquor company's offer, and soon I had a good job as a manger for a respectable firm."

"I told him to keep the ten dollars and give it to someone else who might need it, but he said, no, that I would see more people than he would, and for me to take it back. I took it, and since my heart was very full at this touching incident, I carried it right up to the front of the church and added it to the collection for the superannuated preachers. That man is a well-known citizen of this community today, and his children hold positions of respect.

17

"During my days as junior pastor I got one of the keenest rebukes I have ever received, and I believe that from it I learned a valuable lesson. Reverend Henry R. Davies was my senior preacher at that time. He was then about sixty years of age, and broken in health

Library of Congress

and reality. After having conducted several sermons for him, and finding the attendance discouragingly small, I talked with him about it, trying to find out the reason for the poor showing. I was pretty discouraged, but I said to him:

“Well, at least I can console myself with one thing: I have done my best.” I didn't realize then how Pharisaic it sounded. Wise man that he was, Reverend Davies let a pause ensue, a silence that could be felt, and then, catching my eye, he said, ‘My boy, could you say that on your kness?’

“And of course I at once saw that the position would make a big difference. You know, there are few times when a man can say without qualification that he has done his best.

“During my second year as junior pastor under Reverend Davies I realized that he was going to have to take the superannuate at the next conference. He had no home, no house, and no family to go to, and I wondered what would become of him. Deeply concerned, having come to love him dearly, I was walking through the village one day and suddenly the thought darted through my mind, why should not I make the effort to provide that [home?]? I remember there was a little bridge across the stream beside the road, and my eye was arrested by a crevice in it. I just stood and regarded this spot and thought the problem through. ‘My Lord,’ I said, ‘with Your help I'll do it!’ I walked on, determined to do what I could. I went about among the people who knew Brother Davies, both Methodists and other denominations, for he had many friends in all the churches, and they all gave freely to the cause. The idea caught like fire, for the all loved him. ‘Yes,’ they all said, ‘we know Brother Davies, and we'll be glad to help.’ The Masons were very generous in their contributions. With the money 18 I collected I was able to buy a lot with a house on it, right in the center of town, in the (an) ideal location for the old [man?], for it was near the post office, the school, and the railroad station. It was perhaps the first superannuate home ever bought for a retiring preacher. I did read, later, that such a project had been suggested before in Alabama, but I don't think it was successful. Now, of course, there is a

Library of Congress

regular fund for that purpose, but at that time there was none. He was certainly a fine man, and I know that if anybody in Heaven is permitted to intercede for another, he does for me.

“When I was just beginning my career as itinerant minister, I was sent to [?] When I arrived in town I learned of a family of eight boys. I called upon them, and met their mother. ‘sister Martin,’ I said to her, ‘I understand that you are the mother of eight boys.’ ‘Yes,’ she replied, ‘and proud of it.’ ‘And you should be,’ I answered. ‘I’ve come here to see you to ask you to take care of me too.’ ‘Why, Brother Dempsey, I don’t see how we can do it.’ ‘Yes you can,’ I said, ‘for if you have raised eight fine sons you know all there is to know about taking care of boys.’

“I was a young man just out of college, and I wanted to be connected with some family. The boys of that family were fine young fellows, good sportsmen and masters of woodcraft. It was a great advantage to me to be allowed to stay with them, for they took me into the woods with them, and the exercise and open air did me good, for I was still frail and sickly.

“One of the boys of that family responded to the call to preach, and years later he told me that the association with me was the inspiration he got to serve the church.

“During my stay there in Lumpkin County (?) I traveled from church to church, spending a week in each church community holding “cottage communions.”

19

I would go from house to house, spreading news that tonight at six-thirty, say, at one of the nearby houses there would be a prayer meeting held. All the neighbors who could would come, and sometimes we would have fifty present, sometimes only five or six. Usually the meetings were held in houses about five miles apart, so that in that way the whole community could be covered. I remember one house was way [in?] back in the forest, at the turn of a small winding road. Way in there was the family of Mr. Ware. It was a beautiful rural scene there. The surroundings and manner of life were very much like the

Library of Congress

old southern home. The house was a one-story frame structure, with the guest rooms on either side in front, having a veranda across the front of the house between. In the back was a shed containing the kitchen and dining room, and of course a smokehouse also. In the front yard were shrubs such as the old southern farm homes had — boxwood, cape jessamine, and such — and across the road from the house was a beautiful pasture, in which sheep, horses, cows, and goats grazed. A very pretty rural sight, indeed. They had everything they needed there at home - sorghum syrup in barrels, sausage, lard, meal, beans, and other staples in abundance. There was little money, but they needed little.

“The life of the itinerant minister had its compensations, all right. I usually traveled by horseback and buggy, often finding it convenient to ride horseback because of the narrow bridlepaths through the forests. When I went in the buggy I would often read and study on the way, for my horse was well broken, and would respond instantly to only a word. There was an oilcloth for the buggy which kept out the rain, and in real cold weather I would set a lantern inside to keep me warm. On the bright sunny days I preferred to ride horseback, or even in summer rains.

20

“I had a wonderful horse, that had a spirited gait, and I'll tell you it was thrilling pleasure to gallop through those forests for mile on mile through the sunlit trees. And then in the summer-rains the horse would catch the spirit of the ride, and seemed to enjoy feeling the rain slant down in gusts upon his shining side, tossing his head and running like a free spirit over the trail. The horse would feel the thrill of the rider's body, and of course I would get the thrill of his body, and we would have many an exciting morning. I'll tell you, I asked nothing of any man!

And then sometimes there would be amusing things happen on the road. I remember an experience I had while still in college. I was going from [Conyers?] to [?]? [?], driving a low-swung buggy of my mother's. I was alone, and as I topped a long, gentle incline such as are found in south Georgia, I saw a man walking on the left hand side of the road far

Library of Congress

ahead. When I caught up with him I pulled rein and asked him to get in and ride. He got in, not saying a word. After we had ridden for a mile or so he asked, 'Which one of your churches are you going to?'

"Why, how did you know that I was a preacher?' I asked.

"Oh, I knew that as soon as I saw your buggy top the hill."

"I had always prided myself on not showing my profession, for I preferred to be merely a man among men, teaching the Word, and not be known only as a preacher. This shattered that illusion, however. And many incidents have happened like that since then. Just the other day I was standing on the corner waiting for the street car, and an old darky came up to me and said, 'Pardon me, boss, but you's a preacher, ain't you?'

"Yes,' I replied, 'I don't seem to be able to conceal my profession.'

"Yassuh," he laughed, "it marks a man, don't it?"